

# HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY TO ASSESS ORAL COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

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## **Abstract**

Assessing oral skills in relatively large Business English classes seems a most formidable task for any teacher. How does one make sure to get multiple and valid assessments of each student? This action research paper provides supporting evidence for the correlation between the use of technology and students' engagement. This was achieved by creating and implementing a course which aims at motivating, promoting and assessing oral communication skills. Students are required to use various channels, including video recordings to demonstrate their communication abilities. This framework enables students and instructors alike to overcome the challenges of large classes.

**Keywords:** large classes, technology, engagement

## **1. Introduction**

Motivating, promoting and assessing oral communication skills in relatively large Business English classes poses a number of challenges. Trying to overcome these challenges requires a combination of creativity, thinking out of the box and harnessing technology. We are convinced that our methodology offers an exciting and doable way to accomplish this. We also believe that we are addressing our vision for a different future for our students. According to Becta, "technology has a central role to play in enabling services to be more innovative, responsive and coherent, in ways which would not be practicable without the opportunities technology offers" (2008:3).

In our previous attempts at finding a solution to this challenge, we implemented various pilot studies with the use of [Voicethread](#) (an audio and video digital tool) in our courses in the BA executive programs. These ESP courses activated all of the skills, but mainly focused on the oral components of listening and speaking. Voicethread was received with mixed reviews from the students as many of them had great difficulty in mastering the

tool. It is important to state that the majority of the student population in those courses was middle-aged and above and less inclined technologically.

Interestingly enough, when examining previous background literature in the field, we found research done by Herlihy and Pottage using Voicethread as a “means of formative speaking assessment of students” (2013:9). Their research showed a much more controlled environment from ours and fewer opportunities for students to speak. There also seems to be a difference in the level of complexity of tasks when comparing the two. Pronunciation was a major factor in their assessment of the students, whereas in the business speaking course it was not a major issue to keep in mind. However, Herlihy and Pottage testify that most of the students did enjoy using Voicethread “and the majority reported some connection between their improvement and the use of Voicethread”(2013:11).

In the business realm today, oral speaking skills are equally, if not more, essential than writing. There are many students whose speaking abilities are far more superior to their writing skills. When examining literature in the field, it was found that oral communication skills are most important for success in the business realm for business school graduates at entry level jobs and most influential among managers who select candidates. A survey conducted by Job Outlook 2011 for National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) found that “verbal communication skills were identified as the top ‘soft’ skill sought by employers when recruiting college graduates” (Hastings, R 2012).

## **2. Context of the study**

This action research took place over a three-year period, in a medium-sized public college which grants degrees in a variety of fields including Business Administration. The EAP/ESP team is comprised of professional lecturers in EAP and those who teach the business courses have had formal training in the field.

Students, with the required EAP level, must take an ESP course in order to obtain their degree. The rationale for this course is to prepare the college graduate with practical emphasis for the business world. Building on students’ strengths seemed a good starting point and the basis upon which a new ESP course should be created. We decided to create a business communication skills course based on Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives using the third level of expertise as the rationale.

Course instructors are faced with the challenge of not only evaluating sets of materials for their courses but also the requirement to create and develop some materials themselves. This is an opportunity to evaluate materials and their appropriacy, decide whether they are

worth adopting, adapting or discarding at all. The need for an informed decision and a suitable selection of materials is a fundamental one. Yet the importance lies in how EFL teachers exploit their choices and, therefore, materials should be chosen mainly due to the potential they bear in light of the students' needs.

Technology is another essential element of this course. It consists of the virtual learning environment as well as online tools both for the creation of materials and for students' usage. Barrett & Sharma (2003:39) claim that "adapting and writing up materials for teaching 'POLL' -partially online learning- is a demanding task". At the same time, in an interview with the *English Australia Journal*, Michael McCarthy (2011:63) tells us how "the power of technology" can give "individual attention", an important element for students, as well as "provide learners with presentation and practice that they can do on their own time".

### **3. Main focus of the research**

As this is a communication course, it was vital to ensure that students speak not only in class, but also at home. According to Woodrow (2006, p. 324), "language teachers need to keep students' reasons for second language learning in mind and implement procedures that maximize learning opportunities by assessing oral language ability both in and outside the classroom". We were faced with a multidimensional challenge. First, we had to simulate authentic and varied business situations for students to express themselves orally. Secondly, we needed to ensure that there would be a number of opportunities for the students to speak. The third challenge lay in the platform/s to be used for their oral tasks. The fourth and most crucial challenge was the formative assessment for students' improvement. Hence, an explicit rubric needed to be developed so that it would be clear and easy for the teacher to grade and more importantly, for the students to know how they would be graded. The Eberly Center (Carnegie Mellon University) states that

The goal of formative assessment is to *monitor student learning* to provide ongoing feedback that can be used by instructors to improve their teaching and by students to improve their learning. More specifically, formative assessments help students identify their strengths and weaknesses and target areas that need work.

Feedback would be given online and this enabled students to ameliorate their performance in subsequent tasks.

One essential element of this course is the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) - Moodle- which is the nucleus of the course. Moodle is a rich learning environment which

offers numerous options for lecturers. Creating the Moodle course is tedious work as it is necessary to make sure that all the vital elements are included. The teacher views Moodle as inseparable to their teaching and the students also regard it as a crucial element of the course, second only to the F2F encounters.

Such digital tools as [mailvu](#), [movenote](#) or [vidme](#) have many benefits for the student. During our study, we observed that these tools allowed students to speak freely and redo their work as often as they wished. The students were seen by the lecturer while giving their talk. This was important as it helped the lecturer to determine if they were reading or actually speaking. There were very few technological issues since today's youth are well-equipped to deal with all aspects of technology.

In his book *Deep Learning for a Digital Age*, which discusses the correct use of technology in higher education, Weigel (2002) writes that

...the use of technology in higher education should enrich and extend the student's exploration of new territory. Educational technologies are of little value if they do not add richness and dimensionality to the experience of learning. (2002:xiii)

Each speaking task had specific guidelines which were reviewed first in class so that the students went home with a clear understanding of what was required of them. These guidelines also included the rubrics for the assignment so that students knew exactly how they would be assessed. After the students completed their video, it was uploaded to Moodle. A time limit was given for the videos, and if a student went over the allotted time, points were deducted from the grade. The lecturer believed that giving a time limit would induce the students to plan their talks carefully and only include the important details. Each video was viewed at least once (sometimes more if necessary) and feedback was given online. The lecturer was quite specific as for feedback, noting both the strengths and weaknesses of the student, including fluency, language, pronunciation and content.

These video tasks will help students in the future because it seems that more and more companies are using video interviews. As Elizabeth Garone (2014) cites,

In an August 2013 study by OfficeTeam, a Menlo Park, California-based staffing services firm, found that 63% of human-resource managers in the US often conduct employment interviews by video. That's up from only 14% a year earlier and the percent who use video interviews is only expected to grow.

In addition to the video-based homework tasks, there were also short oral presentations in class. An oral presentation is a common tool used in business, therefore of practical value for the participants. It was also important for the students to be able to speak in front of a live audience. It is true that many students are anxious while performing in front of

a class, but it is important for them to gain confidence in their presentation skills, as it may be a requirement in their job. One of the tasks was based on oral pitches. A second oral task was a digital poster presentation of a new brand's idea that they had created. Their work was uploaded to the VLE, which enabled the lecturer to view the poster after the presentation and give personal feedback.

#### **4. The action research process**

##### **4.1. Research question: How will the digital tools impact students' oral skills and the lecturer's assessment of the same?**

We realized that this course is atypical, yet we felt that technology was the key for the oral skills assessments; it provides the means through which motivation is promoted on the one hand, and individual attention is enabled on the other. Hence, technology serves as the core medium which materializes the success of such a course. Without that, it is likely such a course would not have been possible.

##### **4.2. Action taken**

The course is a two-hour weekly workshop and there have been three cycles in the past three years. The students range in age from 21-35. There are many students with a high level of English and others with an average level but none are native speakers. Most of the students are too timid to talk, while others are not always motivated to do so. The only language permitted in the classroom is English, not only from the lecturer, but more so from the students. Even the process of asking a question or clarifying something had to be done in English. The whole concept of the course was to engage and motivate the students to participate actively during the lessons. Swanson & Nold (2010) claim that

to advance second language competence in students, language teachers should maximize teacher use of the target language in the classroom and provide ample opportunities for students to speak and listen to the others exclusively in the target language

Each lesson is based on a business topic. Some lessons have video work, which is viewed by students followed by a discussion. Pair work and group work are an integral part of the lessons. In order to encourage class participation, a number of activities which require their use of Personal Digital Devices (PDDs) such as cell phones, tablets or laptops, during the lessons were added. [Socrative](#) (a free engagement tool) enables all students to actively

participate in various tasks in real time rather than the usual scenario in which only a few raise their hands in class. Their answers can be seen on the board while they work. Socrative also has the option of the Space Race which will allow the students to work in groups of three and answer questions based on infographics. Here too, the results can be seen 'live' as the students work through the questions and race to the finish. [Kahoot](#) is another tool we harnessed and which served as a variation to Socrative.

In addition, a blended learning approach was embraced by the department, hence two of the lessons (topics) were online. The lecturer chose two topics which she felt would enrich the students' vocabulary, even though they would not be speaking very much.

### **4.3. Findings**

Our aim was to explore the impact of digital tools on our students' oral skills. We hoped that these tools would help them not only improve their speaking abilities, but, more importantly, give them the confidence needed to be able to speak in front of audiences. The formative assessment helped students pinpoint their errors and, in the videos afterwards or the oral tasks in class, they were able to incorporate the teacher's feedback and improve their work. This was reflected in their grades later.

One major positive outcome of the use of digital tools was the fact that all the students passed the course with very impressive grades. In addition, the comments of the students certainly helped reinforce our belief that harnessing technology to assess oral skills is an excellent way for students to improve their speaking abilities and for teachers to assess each individual student's work especially, but not only, in large classes.

The students felt the course was well-organized and that the lecturer was knowledgeable. They also enjoyed the Moodle site. They found the topics relevant, the lessons varied, and the video tasks they were asked to do at home enjoyable. Although they maintained that the course was challenging, it was also fun. They felt that the video tasks helped them to improve their speaking skills and made them more confident when they had to speak. Many of them were pleased to receive detailed feedback, yet others claimed that the feedback was not specific enough. Although the tasks were numerous, they gave students opportunities to improve their grades. The students felt that the online lessons were relevant and many commented that they learned a great deal.

#### **4.4. Reflection**

After the first course, the lecturer realized that although she may have had the necessary components and many students enjoyed the class, it still was not the kind of course that she had foreseen.

An additional issue that the lecturer reflected upon was the fact that the students consistently remarked that there were too many tasks to be done. We realize that this course is more demanding than many others at the college; however, since this course had no exams at all, it was necessary to have an array of tasks in order to give a realistic grade.

The video tasks were interesting to review, and most of the students enjoyed doing them and stated that it gave them more speaking confidence. However, some students had the tendency to speak for a very long time, which hindered the assessment process. Hence, giving a time limit in the second year made video viewing slightly easier. Having said that, viewing 60+ videos (for a number of tasks) is time consuming.

Technology was the facilitator that allowed us to offer a business communication skills course to relatively large classes within a minimal time slot of two weekly hours for 14 weeks. Without technology, it would have been impossible to engage students and have them all participate actively. Technology enabled the lecturer to assess each student's work on an on-going basis.

This course has continued to be successful and has also provided a genuine solution for business administration students who are interested in improving their oral skills. However, it is important to mention that this course does not teach students how to speak, but rather it helps them improve their speaking abilities and builds confidence with feedback and encouragement from the lecturer. Therefore, while no explicit language instruction is given, points are reviewed if they are relevant to the lesson or seem to be prevalent amongst the majority of learners. Although this course is specifically designed for Business English learners, the digital tools mentioned in this paper can be adapted for use in various EAP/ESP courses.

It is our sincere hope that this course will garner more participation, and will also continue to be challenging, worthwhile and enjoyable to the students.

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